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AUTHOR Lueck, Therese L.
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ABSTRACT

A qualitative interdisciplinary study examined mediated women's discourse in the form of the women's page of the "St. Louis Post-Dispatch" from the years 1915, 1920, and 1925. The material was subjected to qualitative content analysis. Findings indicated that women's advice columns mirrored the function of the mother for the culture by instructing her cultural daughter in her duties, often encouraging subversive reading of dominant discourse as a means for the daughter to negotiate a viable position in the patriarchal structure. Findings also indicated that such women's page discourse revealed more of a reversion to the indirectness of nineteenth century feminine influence than employment of direct public access to public discourse, which women ostensibly achieved with the vote. (Twenty-three notes are included.) (RS)

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"Text of the Women's Columns in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch of the Early 20th Century as an Example of the 'Reproduction of Mothering'"

Committee on the Status of Women

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Submitted by:

Therese L. Lueck

Graduate Student

Bowling Green State University

Bowling Green, OH 43403

CS211951

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"Text of the Women's Columns in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch of the Early 20th Century as an Example of the 'Reproduction of Mothering'"

Introduction and Review of the Literature

Mediated women's discourse of the early 20th century merits attention because that was the era in which women gained political voice when they were enfranchised with the vote. It is important to examine how their discourse was mediated through newspapers at this time. Interdisciplinary theories inform this analysis of feminine discourse in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch women's columns of 1915, 1920 and 1925.

As organs of the patriarchial order, newspapers helped define motherhood's role in modern American society by giving women a space in which to initiate the readers-as-daughters to the sphere of mothering as its boundaries were "naturally" expanded to fulfill modern cultural needs. The space, or lack, created in the newspapers acted as a forum for women's discussions and announcements of women's events, such as club meetings. The discussions were not radical in that they were a mother's advising a daughter; they did, however, contain moments of subversion of the dominant discourse within them. Assimilation of the woman's page defines in a physical sense motherhood's domain of home, child and man care, perpetuating the emerging status quo of the white middle class as the nation moved into the modern world.

Through qualitative content analysis, women's advice columns of the woman's page can be seen, in Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic terms, as a means of the reproduction of mothering. Mothering is central to social organization and reproduction of gender.[1] Chodorow notes that even when women began bearing fewer children and had labor-saving devices, the domain of mothering was widened and tasks of mothering increased. In addition, she charges that capitalist industrialization made the mother's role more exclusive by removing helpers such as grandparents from the immediate family situation and men from the sphere of home and family.[2]

Traditionally, writing has been the realm of men, who were part of the world of education, to which women were denied access, along with being part of the public sphere, which was

considered an equally improper place for women. The exclusionary nature of writing is traced back in many studies, such as those by Dale Spender, to the masculine domain of language, which socializes as it humanizes.[3] Although women were excluded from public discourse and from the educated history and culture of writing, they could write diaries to themselves and letters to (female) friends. They were, however, prohibited from speaking in public or writing for the public (which can be read as "male") sphere. "The dichotomy of male/female, public/private is maintained by permitting women to write for private audience (which can be extended to encompass other women) but discouraging them from writing for a public audience, that is, men. "[4] The woman's page gave women the space along with the nod of dominant culture to write in a public arena, since it was for a private audience -- women. Discourse of the women's columns became a device for passing culture across generations, and included the reproduction of mothering itself. Although language is a male domain, the mother has an entry to it. As Susan Rubin Suleiman states, "(F)emininity and its quintessential embodiment, motherhood, can provide a privileged mode of access to language and the mother tongue."[5] As an extension of language, newspapers also allowed motherhood access by allotting space for the mother's discourse and a means for its own reproduction on the woman's page.

Chodorow describes the psychoanalytic process by which mothers, having internalized cultural structures, pass on gender roles, initially to both genders and, after adolescence, almost exclusively to daughters. In her examination of the sociology of gender, Chodorow looks at the role of women as primary parents and the centrality of mothering to the social definition of women. Expanding on Freud's psychoanalysis, she examines the effect this primacy has on, in particular, the female child, proposing that the asymetry of parenting creates an identification between girls and mothers that is never discarded.[6] Instead of breaking with the mother as does a boy, a girl experiences continuity in her gender role identification process, which helps produce generational continuity of gender roles for females, the feminine identification being an early and gradual process that a mother mediates. A girl "learns what it is to be womanlike in the context of this personal identification with her mother. . . . Girls' identification processes, then, are more continuously embedded in and mediated by their ongoing relationship with their mother."[7] This

study proposes that the woman's page was a cultural enactment of such mediated mother-daughter discourse. Chodorow maintains that since girls do not give up their attachment to their mothers as boys must and mothers experience daughters as more like themselves, girls come to womanhood with a preoccupation with mother-child and male-female relationships,[8] which are the issues that became almost the sole preoccupation of the woman's page.

Changes in social relations of production do not necessarily ensure changes in domestic relations of reproduction. For instance, women's mission of childcare was carried into the labor force when, in modern society, home and the workplace became separate places.[9] When children were divided into gender roles, women took care of the daughters, initiating them to "women's work." Chodorow states succinctly that "women's mothering reproduces itself cyclically. Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself."[10]

The reading of women's writing on the woman's page as a means of the reproduction of mothering placed the reader in the position of daughter. Traditionally not a culturally privileged relationship, the mother-daughter relationship (of the white middle class) was given a place – a forum for the passing down of the mother's role. Newspapers in modern society created the lack, or a space in which mothering could be seen (and overseen) as unproblematic from a patriarchal perspective since the process of mothering was accomplished in a modern equivalent of the private sphere. Chodorow points out that social structures include means for their own reproduction;[11] motherhood being a sphere defined by a social structure, this study maintains that text of women's columns was one means of the cultural reproduction of mothering. In the formation of the woman's page, newspapers not only mirrored but enacted this cultural process of reproduction. Newspapers acted as a cultural vehicle for the reproduction of mothering, not only across generations, but, with syndication of the columns, across a nation as well.

This study foregrounds several questions: How can women's columns be seen as a cultural means of the reproduction of mothering? What does an interpretation of the writing as mothering say about the writer/reader relationship? How is the writing problematical, and how has this problem been resolved from a patriarchial perspective?

Methodology

This qualitative interdisciplinary study is a content analysis operationalized by using evidence from the newspaper as a text. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch was chosen as a model for many reasons. Since it is a paper that was well established prior to the time parameters of this study, it can be seen as a valid text for a historical examination. Since it is a publication still in existence, it does not negate the possiblity of longitudinal a study. An evening paper, it had a large circulation paper in a metropolitan area that had a population of over 100,000 by time of the 1920 census, which indicates the publication informed a large audience. Its woman's page seemed typical of metropolitan dailies of the era, carrying advice columns, fashion and fiction; this paper was one of those that carried its society news separate from the woman's page. Being a Pulitzer paper, it was Independent Democratic; although fairly liberal in its editorial policies it was more conservative with regard to women. A paper from the mid-section of the country, it is a stable source for documentation, somewhat insulated from the innovations and fluctuations of the coasts.

Women's discourse from the 1920s is the focus, with Post-Dispatch issues from five years on either side of 1920, the year in which women achieved suffrage, used for purposes of a balanced, coherent and meaningful interpretation of the textual data. Theories of a literary and feminist nature are applied to the readings of this discourse.

Findings

The woman's page can be read as a cultural example of the reproduction of mothering because the women's columns on this page spoke in a maternal voice. Often placed opposite the editorial page, as with the Post-Dispatch, the women's page was given the position of mother. This discourse and placement were seen to be unproblematic in patriarchal terms. Newspapers allowed space for white, middle-class mother-daughter discourse delimited by the bounds of the woman's page. Women's columns mothered the reader, who was presumed not only to be female but a daughter. The discourse of the mother was not radical, but initiated the daughter to her role and expectations in modern society – although implicit in such discourse was subversion. Women were

writing within the accepted cultural sphere since, with their trivia and their moralizing, they were supposed to be writing for a women's audience, not transgressing the taboo that women not write for the male public. The appropriateness of the discourse was to a large extent what made women's columns not only unproblematic but useful for patriarchy.

Discussion

Women's mediated discourse in the era in which women achieved their political voice was spoken in the mother's voice. It engaged in cultural discourse as a male-defined archetypal mother speaking to her cultural daughters, indoctrinating them to their role of motherhood in modern society. Newspapers, as an information disseminating authority of the patriarchy, gave room to women, allocated space for the reproduction of mothering. With the removal of grandparents, servants, and even fathers from the domestic front, the mothering domain was becoming exclusive. Newspapers mirrored this exclusiveness in their delimitation of the woman's page by relegating aspects of male-defined womanhood and to this page. Motherhood was as central to the sociological definition of woman as it was to the parameters of the woman's page.

In the 1920s, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch page designated as the "women's page" was carried in the "Daily Magazine" Section, usually opposite the editorial page, giving the woman's page much the same primacy as editorial comment. Both the placement of the woman's page and its content were similar to those of other large metropolitan newspapers of the time. As was typical of the woman's page around the country, the Post-Dispatch page was filled with "mothering," from childcare to care of home and men. This page charts women's role as it was defined in terms of modern societal needs. Newspapers referred to women in roles associated with their biological functions, such as mother and daughter, not with the diversity available to men's roles. The 1920s Post-Dispatch commonly ran several women's columns, such as those by Helen Rowland, known for her satire, Sophie Irene Loeb, known for her social causes, and Marguerite Mooers Marshall recognized for her philosophical feminist stance. By the mid 1920s, this paper was with the national trend of the professionalization of advice on the women's page: Hannah Wing was identified as "An Authority of Matters Pertaining to Household Management"; that women were becoming

validated home experts was attested to by a health column by Dr. Charlotte C. West. But in 1920, when women's access to public voice was imminent, women's columns did not seem to reflect a confidence in all the promises of the 19th Amendment.

Helen Rowland's column, "As a Woman Thinketh,"[12] the week suffrage was enacted was a letter exchange between a couple, humorously sentimentalizing a long-time relationship. In a parable-like creation, which was her common mode of discourse, she was a mother showing a surrogate or cultural daughter how a wife could remind a husband of his duties. Nagging, even euphemized with grace and wit, was ruefully ignored by the husband. In the process of telling the reader how lovingly and at length these two communicated before marriage, Rowland reminded the reader how marriage, "the little step from the church floor to the altar," could alter two people.

Five years after suffrage was won, Rowland advocated strategies that seem a holdover from 19th century indirect feminine influence, indicating that despite women's access to public voice they had still to rely on strategies of the disenfranchised to access power: marriage, deceipt and subversion of the dominant codes of discourse. Her "Meditations of a Married Woman" was witty and revealing of the period. This particular writing pointed out generational similarities between the roles of "grandmother," "mother," and "daughter."[13] Rowland found women male-defined not only in their roles but in their looks and sex appeal. She emphasized that the position of women in relation to men had not culturally progressed for generations, by showing that they "were all equally deceitful" in hiding their flaws in order to assume the shape and demeanor of an ever unattainable cultural ideal, so that each in her turn could "charm the masculine eye," which was, of course, exactly what she was doing by couching her moments of subversion in witicisms.

Rowland brought forward shared female experiences, different across generations only in their naming. In the process of defining and connecting, she lends the credibility of print to the increasingly sophisticated yet wide role of the mother: "Grandmother used a broom; Mother used a carpet sweeper; daughter uses a vacuum cleaner -- but cleaning days is [sic] the same old joy and the same old horror today, yesterday and forever."[14] She mocked male-defined domesticity through "labor-saving devices." Serving but superficially to keep women and domestic duties up with the sophistication of the times, what labor did such devices actually save?

Rowland was in the driver's seat of a car full of women. She used the power of her position to point out that marriage was the haven for a woman in a misogynous culture. The women were all "going somewhere," and that somewhere was indicated by the fact that "they all listen when a man starts talking sentimental nonsense" because a woman's skill "all amounts to the same thing when it comes to making a good helpmate." In this selfless quest, "all roads lead to Matrimony when a woman drives!" Marriage was used almost synonymously with motherhood in these contexts. Motherhood, the American woman's only road to sainthood, did not wait until one had children, for as one secured a man she realized "that a man HAS to be managed, babied and mothered."[15] Rowland was supplementing the mythology that a man needed a woman's care at home to help him succeed in public. If the woman were wise she would use that opportunity to her advantage. The fact that women had gained the vote had not quelled advocacy for feminine influence. What had the vote changed? At home or in national "domestic" relations women were still encouraged to rely on subversive tactics.

The day suffrage was enacted (August 26, 1920), mothering took a sisterly tack with "Maxims of a Modern Maid" by Marguerite Mooers Marshall. This column's short length indicated that perhaps it was an experimental venture in imitation of a quick sisterly chat defined in patriarchial terms – trivia, snatches of advice wittily phrased. (In newspaper terms, it is not unlikely that this column was a filler that could have been cut to any length the newspaper needed to fill a space.) Yet the title belied the fact that this article, too, was about the married state and gender relationships. She cloaked her critique in trivialities of domesticity, charging that the only marital problems the average husband was conscious of were "getting into the family menu as much steak, roast beef and ice dream as he wants."[16] The motherly advice, in the guise of a sisterly chat, was for the women of married and the soon-to-be-married, the only group left desiring that ideal state, which of course was conventional marriage. The maxims were, however, frank: "When a girl finds a man nowadays who knows how to make love gracefully, tenderly, subtley, she is far too grateful even to wonder who taught him." She mixed domestic and mythic realms, adding a new quip of relevance to Eden: "Eve took the initial bite out of the apple, but it was Adam who set her to work paring, coring, making a crust and baking the first apple pie."

In contrast with the women's columns, when a representative of male culture gave advice on the woman's page, he spoke with authority, usually that of some profession such as doctor, in a condescending advice column. Dr. D.A. Thom wrote a column "issued to the Post-Dispatch by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor."[17] It would have been easy to read a voice that seemingly boomed from the heavens as unmediated, ultimate authority. But the woman's page reader was trained in resistance techniques, beginning with an upbringing of fiction,. Having negotiated moments of subversion employed by columnists such as Rowland, she perhaps would have been prepared to recognize in this column, too, the mechanics of mediation. Disruptive interpretation would have allowed her to negotiate her stance with relation to the text, actively distancing herself to lessen the blow of the threat and disrupt the insertion of patriarchal guilt intent on lodging in her psyche. "Overcoming Childhood Fears" is the simple headline given No. 12 in the series on "Child Management," which was clearly intended as a message for a female audience from the male power structure. It spoke from the position of authority, not from the discourse of mothering, such as had Rowland. Although it was not entirely clear from the byline that the doctor was indeed a male, issuance from the male-dominated political power structure is justificaiton enough to refer to the author with the masculine pronoun. The column began rather broadly, by including the father as a "parent" but by the end of the first paragraph it was clear that the intended parent of this diatribe was "mother." The column began: "Children quietly adopt the attitude of their parents, be it one of bravery or fear. Many mothers wonder where their children get their fear of lightning or animals, forgetting that they themselves have shown fear when they thought the children were not noticing."[18] Not only was the parental unit whittled down to the primary parent, but "children" quickly excluded daughters, giving prominence to the mother-son relationship, as valued by patriarchy.

Instructional anecdotes structured the column, tracing fears of the male child into adulthood, showing how "the grown man still feels the pain" because the mother responded playfully when the boy wondered anxiously if he had horns growing out of his forehead. When the column concluded that "in training the child every effort should be made to see that fear does not become a curse," the all-too-clear message remained: The "effort" was not for the child's sake

alone but carried a thinly veiled threat to the mother. If the man grew up with fears, it would be assumed that he had had a bad mother. Not only had she not made "every effort," earning herself the judgment of failure, but she had become a witch. Women who spoke through columns were not so empowered by this culture as the doctor to assume such a mantle of male authority. They could only speak as a mother to a daughter to still be within the culturally accepted women's realm of writing.

Mediation of an authority figure, however, was a structural device commonly used by women columnists to reveal to their readership that distance through which the voice of authority was filtered. For instance, Fay Stevenson talked of Dr Andre Triden, whose advice as a "noted psycho-analyst, author and lecturer"[19] was that the forgetfulness of a mate was a sure indication that love was growing cold. Marguerite Dean acted as mediator for W.L. George, noted for his "romances expressed in terms of modern realism,"[20] as he gave the heterosexual couple its "cupidometer" reading, also using forgetfulness of the partner as a gauge for determining when romance was going out of a marriage. Dean was perhaps injecting subversion into her mediation of George, whom she quoted, "'Celibacy for a woman -- for a man there is no such thing, whatever he may say -- means the repression of her chief instinct, the instinct to do something for somebody. So she goes into any sort of movement or cause or religion that offers itself -- and suffers. . . .'"[21] By prefacing this quote with, "he smilingly assured me," she filtered this discourse through skepticism, encouraging that gentle yet perceptive reader not to accept patriarchal discourse at face value. Sentiments, such as those expounded by the Thom and George, were part of the burgeoning redefinition of the mythology of motherhood, for which selflessness of the mother was "natural" and therefore naturally exploitable by the patriarchy.

Materials, such as columns, amalgamated to form the woman's page were intended for women readers. That the intended audience was female can be recognized in many ways, such as the emphasis on women, apparent nowhere else in the newspaper. On the woman's page, women were subjects of stories, young white women smiled from the page in softly focused photographs of debutantes, illustrations boasted the latest women's fashions and showed how to sew them at home. The page overflowed with moral lessons, indirectly aimed at society itself, as these women

readers assumed the mothering role themselves in passing on dominant ideology. Although women were stepping from the pedestal into the real world, they were still cast in the role of moral overseer and mediator of culture. Not only was the reader supposed to be female, therefore lifting the taboo of women's writing for the patriarchy, but the women read as daughters of the columnists who mothered. As the syndicated columnists mothered, the reader-as-daughter role was enforced. The continuity the daughter retained with the mother, which her male sibling relinquished, empowered her to read the woman's page, which was indeed directed toward her.

Mrs. Elizabeth Kent's short column, "Home Economics,"[22] was accompanied by a sketch of a white woman at a modern bathroom sink, a frilled apron tied at the front of her skirt. She was washing out garments that indeed could be mentioned in this column since it was assumed that the male readership would not be drawn by such trivialities, preserving the sanctity of the woman's page if not from the male gaze at least from his interest. Since women's trivia would be supposed not engage the male readership, women writers would be writing for women readers in a newly defined sphere of the private, retaining the taboo that distanced women from public discourse. Kent tendered her motherly advice in the guise of acquiescence with expert advice from "clothing economists" and "physicians." Her concurrence with them, no doubt for health reasons, lent this column credibility. Her advice was toward "a daily change of stockings." The reader-as-daughter riveted by this timely issue, she would read on to find mothering creating the stereotypical modern woman's bath – stockings draped as tinsel. Alternatives to the "daily change" were presented in terms perhaps intended encourage action through disgust of her lack, such as, "the perspiration from the feet rotting the fiber. . . ."[23] Mom was telling her cultural daughter to keep her feet warm, clean and beautiful, and to be economical about it, for stockings, although essential investments for any lady's daily wardrobe, were not the stuff of which the household budget need be made. Of course, no good mother would forget the children, who were given mention at the end of the column, for presumably it would be the reader-as-daughter, as she assumed her own duties of mothering, who would dress the children, after washing their feet as well as their socks.

Conclusions

Traditionally, women have been excluded from patriarchial discourse, and newspapers have been no exception to this. Although language is of the public and male domain, mothers have an access to language, in order to propagate the patriarchy. Writing as a mother also secured access to mediated discourse, as can be seen in the columns of the woman's page. The woman's page was a space allotted by the male power structure for a specific type of feminine discourse, that of a mother speaking to a daughter. In this manner, patriarchy was served in two ways. Through the woman's page discourse carried on the reproduction of mothering for the culture without transgressing the cultural taboo of women's writing for a public audience.

Mothers are excluded from discourse for many reasons, paramount among them that reproduction -- including its expanded definition in the age of industrial capitalism -- must take all their time, instead of some other notion of feminine creative production. Women's advice columns mirror the function of mother for the culture. Speaking in a mediated maternal voice, a women's advice columnist instructed her cultural daughter in her duties, often encouraging subversive reading of dominant discourse as a means for the daughter to negotiate a viable position in the patriarchal structure. Such discourse of the woman's page revealed more of a reversion to the indirectness of 19th century feminine influence than employment of direct public access to public discourse, which women ostensibly achieved with the vote.

Notes

[1] Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 7.

[2] Chodorow 5.

[3] Dale Spender, Man Made Languag[e] 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 3.

[4] Spender 192.

[5] Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Writing and Motherhood" in The (M)other Tongue, eds. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahare, Madelon Sprenghether, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 371.

[6] Chodorow 133.

[7] Chodorow 174-176.

[8] Chodorow 166-168.

[9] Chodorow 4.

[10] Chodorow 7.

[11] Chodorow 206.

[12] Helen Rowland, "As a Woman Thinketh: From Romanticist to Realist," St. Louis Post-Dispatch 27 August 1920: [23].

[13] Rowland, "Meditations of a Married Woman," 25 August 1925: [38]. This column was essentially the same one as her "Sayings of Mrs. Solomon," but when she changed syndicate affiliations she also changed the name.

[14] Rowland [38].

[15] Rowland [38].

[16] Marguerite Mooers Marshall, "Maxims of a Modern Maid," 26 August 1920: [31].

[17] Dr. D. A. Thom, "Child Management: Overcoming Children's Fears," 25 August 1925: [38].

[18] Thom [38].

[19] Fay Stevenson, "Hubby – Did You Forget the Spool of Thread for Wifey?; Wifey – Did You Forget the Steak Hubby Asked For?" 25 August 1920: [27].

[20] Marguerite Dean, "Want To Be Happy Though Married? Keep Your Eye on the Cupidometer; Don't Open Your (Hubby's, Wife's) Letters," 27 August 1920: [23]. "Marguerite Dean" was probably a by line of Marguerite Mooers Marshall using the name of her husband, Sidney Walter Dean.

[21] Dean [23].

[22] Mrs. Elizabeth Kent, "Home Economics," 25 August 1920: [27].

[23] Kent [27].